



**“They want you to be fat...it means  
they’re feeding you well”:  
A qualitative investigation of body image and food  
choice decision-making among Junior High  
School students in urban Accra, Ghana**

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# Background

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- Nutrition transition → changes in food systems and diets
  - Traditional, unprocessed foods → diets high in refined carbohydrates, sodium, saturated or trans fats and animal-source foods
- Implicated in widespread development of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs)
- World's adolescents (ages 10-19) are vulnerable to diet-related health risks
  - Experiencing significant life changes alongside environmental changes.

# Background

- Ghana is no exception to global dietary shifts, rapid urbanization, and rising NCDs
- 57% of Ghana's population <age 25
  - Challenges and opportunities!
- Widespread proliferation of unhealthy food and beverage marketing in urban food environments
- Promotional content targets adolescent consumers using a variety of sociocultural messages and tactics, particularly related to body image ideals





# Objective

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This study explored how attractiveness and body image are conceptualized among urban Ghanaian adolescents and how various sociocultural messages regarding body image influence food choice.



# Methods

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- The Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability, and Leadership Support for NCDs (MEALS4NCDs) Project measured the degree of unhealthy food marketing to provide evidence for creating healthier food environments for Ghanaian children.
- In-depth interviews with public junior high school students (n=48)
  - July-August 2020
  - Ages 14-17
  - Six districts in Greater Accra Region
- Interviews conducted in schools in English
- Audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim
- Transcripts coded with NVivo 12 using a thematic analysis

# Results

## Theme 1: Conceptualizations of attractiveness and unattractiveness

- Male students - “muscularity,” “tall stature,” and “broad shoulders”
- Female students - “wide hips” and “a Coca-Cola shape”
- Both sexes preferred “flat stomach,” “slim,” and “stylish clothing and hair”
- Overweight or obese was “unattractive” and “unhealthy”

# Results

## Theme 2: Importance of achieving and/or maintaining a specific body image

- Attracting romantic partners
  - “When you are fat...it’s not very easy for you to get a partner. Because when a lady sees you, she says this guy is too fat. They don’t like fat guys.” (M, 16 yrs old)
- Reducing physical limitations
  - “That person is too fat and if we should say something an emergency, he should run right now, the person can't run. He'll fall and all of us will run over him.” (M, 17 yrs old)
- Avoiding social stigma about body size extremes
  - “Ok, they will say they shouldn’t be very fat because in Ghana, most of the time they say when you are too fat, you look like an elderly person, an ugly person” (F, 14 yrs old)

# Results

## Theme 3: Desired body size and shape

- Body image satisfaction more common among older teens (16-17 years old) and male students
- Body image dissatisfaction more common among younger teens (14-15 years old) and female students



# Results

## Theme 4: Sociocultural influences on body image

- Parents and family
  - “They [*parents, elders*] want you to be fat. Because the moment you start to show or exhibit signs of fatness, it means they’re feeding you well.” (M, 16, yrs old)
- Friends and peers
  - “...most of my friends, we’d like to look like a model...don't want to be fat nor lean.” (F, 16 yrs old)
- Media and celebrities
  - “Because of the body [*footballer Cristiano Ronaldo*]. The way his tummy is flat and his...muscular body, the way he speaks. I like him.” (M, 17 yrs old)

# Results

## Theme 5: Body image influence on food choices

- Most students felt they were either too thin or too fat and changed their diets and portion sizes periodically to address those concerns.
  - “Sometimes I feel I'm too thin, so I should eat more.” (F, 16 yrs old)
- Most students admitted changing their food choices to try to acquire a body figure like someone they admire.
  - “...I take porridge with bread and fried egg...sometimes half of it. I think that's good. Like that's how I want to be. Like I don't want to be fat... I want to be like my pastor. How he is. So that I will look attractive.” (M, 16 yrs old)



# Conclusion

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- Conceptualizations of attractiveness and body image among study participants were largely influenced by their friends, peers, and media messages
- Participants described having opposing ideas with their elders about ideal body size, which affected their food choice behaviors
- Future interventions could utilize social marketing to promote nutritious diets to attain preferred body figure and reduce social stigma about body size.



For more info, please visit [www.meals4ncds.org](http://www.meals4ncds.org)

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